



Les Carnets de l'ACoSt

Association for Coroplastic Studies

12 | 2014

Varia

Heroic Offerings: The Terracotta Plaques from the Spartan Sanctuary of Agamemnon and Cassandra

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/acost/353>

DOI: 10.4000/acost.353

ISSN: 2431-8574

Publisher

ACoSt

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 December 2014

Electronic reference

Gina Salapata, « Heroic Offerings: The Terracotta Plaques from the Spartan Sanctuary of Agamemnon and Cassandra », *Les Carnets de l'ACoSt* [Online], 12 | 2014, Online since 30 July 2015, connection on 22 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/acost/353> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/acost.353>

This text was automatically generated on 22 September 2020.



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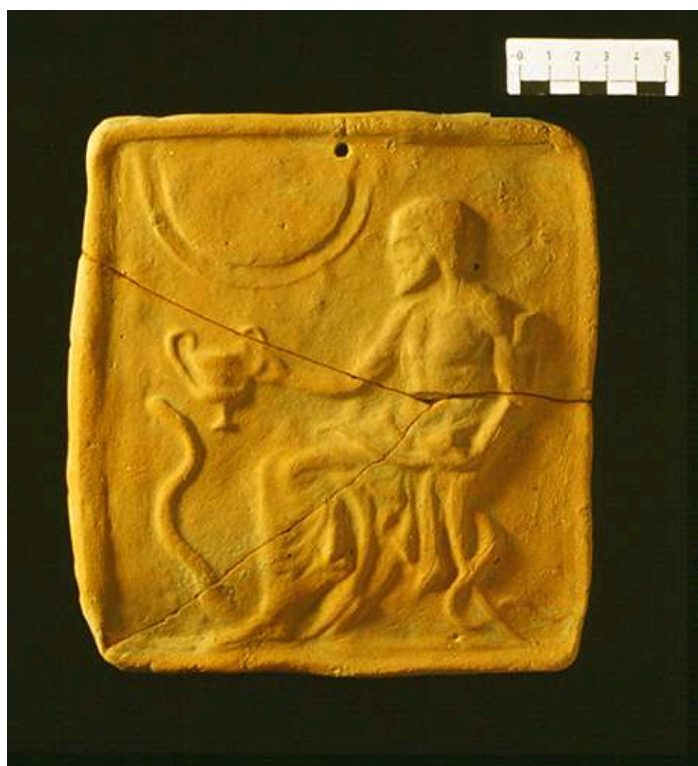
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Gina Salapata, *Heroic Offerings: The Terracotta Plaques from the Spartan Sanctuary of Agamemnon and Cassandra*, University of Michigan Press, 2014

- 1 My study focuses on a large assemblage of terracotta plaques with relief decoration. These molded plaques were discovered with other offerings in a sanctuary deposit excavated at Amyklai, near Sparta, more than 50 years ago, but they have remained unpublished. They date from the late 6th to the late 4th century BCE and number over 1,000 complete and fragmentary pieces. In technique, style, and iconography, they form a homogeneous group unlike any other from mainland Greece. The large number of plaques and variety of types reveal a stable and vigorous coroplastic tradition in Lakonia during the late Archaic and Classical periods.
- 2 The discovery of these plaques allows us to examine a substantial group of Lakonian terracottas and trace its development through the centuries. Systematic study of one of the largest corpora of terracotta relief plaques as a group also contributes to a better understanding of this class of votive offering. I show that terracotta relief plaques were very common offerings in Lakonia and neighboring regions, and because many more similar plaques exist but remain unpublished, this study will provide a backdrop and establish a system of classification that can be used as the basis for studying other plaques.

Terracotta plaque from Amyklai (Sparta Museum 6230/1).



- 3 A section of this study is devoted to detailed examination of the literary, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence pertaining to the cult and its recipients. I show that the offerings from the Amyklai deposit are clearly associated with the sanctuary of *Kassandra* (known in Lakonia as *Alexandra*), which allegedly contained the graves of *Agamemnon* and *Kassandra*. The cult practiced at the sanctuary was an important one for the region. It was related to a variant tradition that placed the palace—and, consequently, the murder of *Agamemnon* and *Kassandra*—not in the Argolid, as the tragic poets said, but in Lakonia.
- 4 The ultimate aim of this study is to derive additional information about the cult. Being one of the most popular offerings in the sanctuary and having a distinctive, local iconography, the Amyklai plaques are an important source of information about the nature and conduct of the cult. They reveal the local character of the cult and chart its evolution through time. Although this study focuses on the art historical and religious significance of the terracotta plaques, it also analyzes certain sociopolitical implications, especially regarding the role of the iconography in local social and political structures, as well as the diffusion of the plaques to other areas.
- 5 The plaques are catalogued and analyzed from a technical, typological, stylistic, and iconographic point of view. Among the subjects represented are riders, warriors, and reclining and standing figures. The most popular and distinctive subject, that of a seated man often holding a drinking cup and accompanied by a snake, is closely related to that found on a series of more than 50 Lakonian stone reliefs whose function and iconography have long been debated; thus, final publication of the Amyklai plaques has been long anticipated, with the expectation that they might shed new light on the stone reliefs and on Lakonian religious traditions in general. One of the main objectives of this study, then, is to clarify the function of the stone reliefs and interpret the scenes

they depict, and to this end, it includes a detailed analysis of these reliefs. I show that the reliefs and plaques with seated figures follow a similar typological, iconographic, and stylistic development, with the plaques probably having started as an inexpensive and quickly made alternative to the reliefs. I argue that both groups were considered appropriate dedications to heroes, a conclusion that fits well with the evidence about the nature of the cult at Amyklai and the importance of heroes in Spartan society.

ABSTRACTS

This monograph is a contribution to the study of religion in Sparta, one of Greece's most powerful poleis, whose history is well known but whose archaeology has been much less satisfactorily explored. Through the comprehensive study of a distinctive class of terracotta votive offerings from a specific sanctuary, I shed light on both coroplastic art and regional religion; and by integrating archaeological, historical, literary, and epigraphic sources, I provide important insights into the heroic cults of Lakonia and contribute to an understanding of the political and social functions of local ritual practice.

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